DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 023 CS 006 271

AUTHOR Anderson, Jonathan
TITLE The Challenges of the Multicultural Classroom.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the United Kingdom Reading Association (18th, Edinburgh, Scotland, July 27-31, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cloze Procedure; *Cultural Differences; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; Instructional Materials; *Literacy; *Multicultural Education; Readability Formulas; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Second Language Instruction; Second Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

The multicultural pattern in recent Australian immigration poses a pressing issue for reading instruction. Students coming from homes where only English is spoken, or English and a Northern European language are spoken, perform better on reading tests than do students from homes where other languages are spoken. There is also little reflection among the homogeneous teachers of the cultural diversity of their students, and this mismatch between teachers and students is perpetuated by reading curriculum materials. There are, however, several promising developments in the assessment of reading comprehension and linguistic competence of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and migrant students. The Cloze Reading Comprehension Test uses a modified form of cloze procedure and--rather than compare ESL students with a standardized group of peers--compares them against a high level of reading competence, measuring how far readers have yet to go for reading competence. "Origins" is a language/history kit, designed to aid language development in non-English background students while introducing them to Australian history. Australian reading books have recently been published in several different languages (Greek, Turkish, Italian) to increase literacy in students' native language and facilitate the transfer of literacy to English. Finally, a Swedish readability formula (Lix) may be useful in multicultural classrooms when applied to texts in foreign languages. (HTH)

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THE CHALLENGES OF THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

Professor Jonathan Anderson

Flinders University of South Australia

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CS006271

Paper to be presented at the United Kingdom Reading Association Eighteenth Annual Course and Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, July 1981.

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The text for this article is taken from the Guiness Book of Records. It is said that there was a boy (probably from Edinburgh) who didn't like the book about Australia that his mother had brought up for bedtime reading.

> "Mummy", he complained, "Why did you bring that book which I didn't want to be read to out of from about Down Under up for?"

This lad was clearly a reluctant reader. Of course, there are reluctant readers in Australia too. The first immigrants to South Australia arrived from England in 1836 on board the Buffalo. Two years later a school opened on North Terrace, Adelaide. In his first report on 21st July 1838, the head-teacher, aptly-named Mr. Shepherdson, newly recruited from England, wrote of his 57 charges:

> Ten children spell and read words of two letters.
> Nine children spell and read words of three letters.
> Nine children spell and read words of four letters.
> Six children spell and read words of five letters.
> Ten children spell and read words of two syllables.
> Seven children spell and read words of three syllables.
> Eleven children spell and read almost every word.
> (Quoted in Giles 1975 p. 7)

Towards a multicultural society

Since 1836 there have been continuing waves of immigration and it is the changed pattern of these in recent years that poses, at least in Australia, one of the most pressing issues for reading teaching in the eighties. A major report to the Australian Government (Galbally 1978) opens with the statement:

> We believe Australia is at a critical stage in the development of a cohesive, united, multicultural nation
> (Galbally 1978, p. 3)

Another educational commentator notes:

> The task of making a success of a multicultural society in Australia is a critical one, probably the most critical it faces, and it will require action on political, economic and cultural fronts, as well as educational. For the education system it will provide its most challenging task in the decade ahead...
> (Bassett 1980, p. 78)

This article examines some of the dimensions of the educational task and then focuses on certain implications for reading teachers, especially as these relate to assessing reading and language competence and determining the reading difficulty of curriculum materials, both English and non-English.

So that the educational task to be faced may be seen as part of a wider context, let me highlight a few features of Down Under.

Some features of Down Under

For those who may know little of Down Under, I could say that Australia is the smallest, oldest, driest and flattest of the world's six continents. Although the smallest continent, it is one of the largest countries and most of western Europe would fit comfortably within it. Although the oldest continent (Aboriginal remains date at 30,000-40,000 years B.C.), European settlement dates back less than 200 years. Much of Australia is dry and hot: the discharge of all the nation's rivers into the sea, for example, is only one-tenth that of the Amazon; and the township of Marble Bar on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert (which lies to the north of the Gibson Desert and the Great Victoria Desert, just up from the Nullabor Plain) holds a world record for 160 consecutive days of above-century temperatures. Yet to the east of these great deserts (about 2000 km or so) are the Australian Alps which, in winter, contain snowfields larger than all of Switzerland. Most of the rest of the country is relatively flat, so much so that another strange world record is for the longest section of straight track - almost 500 km across the Nullabor (appropriately named for there are no trees).

The features I wish to highlight, however, are demographic rather than geographic. Although one of the world's most sparsely populated countries, Australia is one of the most urbanised (86 per cent being classified as urban); two-thirds of the country's population live in the capital cities; nearly one in every two Australians live in either Sydney or Melbourne. Other demographic features, that have a bearing on what is to follow, are that one-fifth of Australia's population was born overseas and a further fifth was born to foreign-born parents (Australian Students and their Schools 1979). In the seventies the pattern of migration changed markedly with migrants from Europe falling from 70 to 40 per cent while at the same time there was an increase in migration from the Middle East, Asia and South America (Galbally 1978). The result today is that in eighty per cent of the nation's schools there are some children for whom English is not the native language; in some schools there are nearer eighty per cent of children of migrant background. A further feature not widely known is that Melbourne now ranks as the third largest Greek city in the world (behind Athens and New York) and Sydney in the world's fourth largest Greek city.

The educational challenges

The educational challenge arising from the changing demographic pattern begins to emerge from consideration of the findings of some recent studies on student performance, teachers' background and curriculum materials evaluation.

Students' linguistic competence

The Australian Council for Educational Research published its first report on literacy and numeracy in Australian schools in 1976 (Keeves and Bourke 1976). One of the breakdowns reported was according to the language spoken in the home. At both the 10 and 14 year-old levels, students coming from homes where only English was spoken or where a Northern European language and English was spoken performed better on the reading test items than did students from homes where other languages were spoken. There was a clear trend for students from homes where no English at all was spoken to do less well than students from homes where a Southern European language and English or another language and English was spoken.

The items of linguistic competence found most difficult at the 10 year-old level (with percentages responding) were:

	% correct	
	No English	All 10 Year-olds
In America the rich / a rich / often rich buy very large cars	69	88
The news is / were / are good today	72	92

At the 14 year-old level, the second item above was still causing considerable difficulty for those where no English was spoken in the home (66 per cent correct) compared with 98 per cent correct for the total cohort. The authors of the report conclude:

> This evidence suggests that the difficulties which students from foreign language backgrounds encounter in reading and indeed in all their school learning arise in part from their lower level of competence in using the English language. Those students from homes where no English is spoken would appear to be at a marked disadvantage at the 10 year-old level, but also clearly handicapped at the 14 year-old level.
>
> (Keeves and Bourke 1976, pp. 99-100).

That the problem is not confined to school age only is confirmed by a literacy survey conducted in Sydney (Goyen 1976). The majority of functional illiterates was found to be among the older age groups and among those born in non-English speaking countries. Of non-British migrants, for example, 43.3 per cent were classified as functionally illiterate compared with 3.7 per cent of English speaking adults and the former percentage does not include those declining to take the test because of inadequate English.

Ethnic composition of teaching force

In a national survey of teachers in Australian schools conducted by the Australian College of Education (Bassett 1980), it was reported that 89 per cent of Australian teachers were from homes where the native language of both parents was English; only 8 per cent were from homes where the native languages of neither parent was English. Most Australian teachers (85 per cent) were born in Australia and 7 per cent were born in England. Bassett (1980) comments:

> Considering the increased cosmopolitan character of Australian society, and the present greater stress on the learning of foreign languages, the homogeneous language background of Australian teachers suggested by these figures is a matter of some significance.
> (Bassett 1980, p. 8)

Bassett concludes:

> In short, it could be said that there is little reflection among [teachers] of the cultural diversity which now exists in the general population.
> (Bassett 1980, p. 78)

In another survey of user opinion of curriculum materials for teaching English as a second language (ESL), conducted across four Australian States (Anderson 1981), teachers were asked whether they spoke any languages other than English. Among primary ESL teachers, two-thirds responded in the negative; at the secondary level, the proportion claiming to speak another language was predictably higher (60 per cent). ESL teachers, however, might be expected to be a selected group as far as knowledge of languages is concerned. It would seem reasonable to surmise that among Australian teachers at large the great majority would be monolingual. Such a conclusion is in line with the data on place of birth reported by Bassett (1980) and the generally declining level of foreign language learning in Australian schools (despite the current greater stress). This mismatch between the language (and other) background of teachers and that of many students in schools is a matter of concern.

The subculture of many students

The ethnic composition in many of the nation's schools has been alluded to above. Wilson (1980), in describing what motivated her to write a series of bilingual readers, says of the large inner suburban school in Melbourne where she was Vice-Principal:

> Over 70% of the pupils were of migrant origin and each year over half of the beginner intake spoke no English at all. The small percentage of Australian pupils was from the low socio-economic section of the community. The largest single ethnic group was Greek (40%) with Italian and Jugoslav children making up the next two largest groups... These children, Australian and migrant together, shared a subculture. This was the culture of an inner city area with noise, traffic, small homes, busy narrow streets, people of many nationalities, shops with a great diversity of food, a wide range of music, literature and so on. What a richness of experience these children shared! Yet on school entry the richness of this subculture was not acknowledged.
>
> (Wilson 1980, p. 9)

The picture Wilson (1980) describes is fairly typical of all Australian cities. In Adelaide, for example, if one were to draw a line through the city centre thereby dividing the city into north and south, one would find that the majority of students sharing the subculture depicted by Wilson live on the northern side; most of their teachers live in the southern suburbs, commuting to school daily. Not only is there a giant chasm between the language backgrounds between a majority of teachers and a large proportion of their students, the daily living experiences of the two groups differ vastly - and this I see as one of the major issues facing education, and especially reading education, in the decade ahead.

Curriculum materials mismatch

Many of the activities of schools perpetuate these differences between teachers and students. Nowhere does this apply more than to reading curriculum materials where often reading books feature tidy, well-mannered middle-class children from middle-class homes. This mismatch, beautifully illustrated in the following extract from the Times Educational Supplement, suggests that the problem does not apply to Australia alone.

My name is Wayne.
My name is Sonia.
My mother is a cleaner in a posh house.
Two kids live there.
They are called Janet and John.
They are a right pair of drips.
They are always looking up at aeroplanes, shouting
"Look, mummy".
We think they are round the twist.
They have a dog called Scot.
We have a dog called Tiger.
Tiger ate Scot.
John said, "Naught doggy".
I thumped John.
Sonia slugged Janet.
Their mother did her nut.
My mother fetched her a right swipe.
Janet said, "Look John, Mummy is in the tree.
Look John".
Mother got the boot.
Mother now works in the boozer.
She brings free samples from work.

Emerging developments

To return to the text for this article, I would like to draw from several works "out of from Down Under" and try to present a flavour of some of the directions reading research is taking. Following the framework above, discussed below are certain developments in the assessment of reading comprehension and linguistic competence of ESL and migrant students, curriculum development in the field of ESL, and explorations in languages other than English to assess textual difficulty.

New tests for ESL and migrant students

There has been considerable research activity in Australia into the use of cloze procedure in the ESL context. I think it is true to say that McLeod (cited in Gilliland 1972) first brought cloze procedure to the attention of the British research community in an article in the British Journal of Psychology in 1962. The Gapadol test (McLeod and Anderson 1972) was the first standardized test of reading comprehension utilizing cloze procedure.

Another reading comprehension test, developed for second language learners in the Pacific region, is the Cloze Reading Comprehension Test (Anderson 1976). This test makes use of a modified form of cloze procedure. That is, in the test's construction all words in the test passages were systematically deleted by constructing different versions of the test using a fixed deletion system (5,10,15..;6,11,16..etc.) and administering

these to random groups of highly competent ESL readers. From item analysis those items which were virtually redundant to this group of readers were identified and these constituted the final test items. The basis for the test then is not that primary age ESL students are compared with a standardized group of their age peers (as in traditional test theory) but rather they are compared against a high level of reading competence. Thus the test measures in effect how far along the road to reading competence readers have yet to travel.

The Cloze Reading Comprehension test is a global measure of reading comprehension. Another instrument developed in Australia that purports to measure the component skills of English language is TEMS, Tests of English for Migrant Students (ACER 1977). TEMS comprises 84 criterion-referenced sub-tests of listening, speaking, reading and writing, each test designed to pinpoint just where non-native speakers are at. Kemp (1980), in a detailed review of the TEMS program, writes:

> In the TEMS program, the statistical information is simple. We can judge expected differences in the performances of children who have been exposed to English for relatively short or long terms. We can judge whether items are easy or difficult for native speakers as well as the non-native. We can look at precise diagnostic information alongside a general achievement level. We can find out from very specific information whether our suspicions about ESL children's confusions in pronouns or prepositions, active or passive voice, tenses and so on, are well-founded or not.
>
> (Kemp 1980, pp. 44-45)

ESL curriculum materials production

The Language Teaching Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Education, under the child migrant education program, has been active in the production of curriculum materials for second language learners during the past ten years. These include Learning English in Australia, a course for beginners aged 8-12 years. An on-going project, the first 20 units of the 100-unit course were distributed to schools in 1974; units 61-80 are expected to be distributed in 1981. A second set of materials produced by the Language Teaching Branch are the English Development Materials which are designed for second-phase learners aged 10 to 16 years. These materials, comprising the Transit series of magazines with accompanying teacher's notes and students' follow-up activities, are developed at two levels - Transit Green for upper primary and Transit Red for secondary students. Distribution commenced in 1978 and this also is an on-going project.

The most recent materials to be launched by the Commonwealth Department of Education is Origins (Language Teaching Branch 1981), a language/history kit designed to aid the language development of students of non-English speaking migrant background experiencing difficulty with the reading and writing demands of a subject like history. The resource kit comprises reading cards (arranged in units : Aborigines, Discovery, Convicts, Expansion, Gold, Bushranger and Pioneers), charts, tapes, student activities and teacher's manual. Initial reaction to Origins from teachers has been highly favourable tending to support the expressed hope of the developers that:

> Origins should assist the second-phase learner towards a greater competence in a wide range of language and literacy skills, and at the same time give an introduction, at least, to some important periods in early Australian history. Even more significantly, it should serve to promote collaboration between the ESL teacher and the history teacher, breaking down curriculum barriers and creating a greater awareness both of the needs of the second-phase learner and of the language elements inherent in the discipline of history (Language Teaching Branch 1981, p. 10).

Bilingual readers

One set of Australian reading books recently published in Greek, Italian, Turkish and English (with a no-text edition for other language groups) is City Kids (Wilson 1978, 1979, 1980). Such books are designed in part to help children become literate in their first language, thus facilitating the transfer to literacy in English. But as well they allow children from non-English homes to share their books with their parents. Reaction to these books by teachers and children has been very favourable. Munro and Charnock (1979), in their description of the materials, include a photograph of a child reading one of the books and his surprised reaction to find the text was in Greek. Another photograph shows Greek, Italian and English editions of City Kids being shared by children at a primary school.

Readability measurement in other languages

Klare (1963) in his book on readability measurement commented that "very little readability, research and formula development have taken place in other countries" (p. 98). Reference was being made to the United States but the comment would appear still pertinent today for the UKRA publication

by Gilliland (1972) and Harrison's (1980) recent book, Readability in the Classroom, make no reference to readability measurement of non-English materials.

Possibly the measurement of text difficulty in other languages is not an issue in the United Kingdom. However, for the kinds of reasons advanced in the first part of this article, the challenge of making a success of a multicultural society in Australia would demand that developmental work be undertaken in this area.

A beginning has been made. The use of cloze procedure with English as a second language has been extensively investigated (Anderson 1976). Modified forms of cloze procedure with blanks of the same length as deleted words were found feasible. (This has the advantage of allowing cloze tests to be made photographically, thereby incorporating such factors as size of type, illustrations and page layout into the estimate of readability). How to interpret cloze readability scores is also reported.

Exploratory experiments in Malay and Mandarin Chinese have also been reported by Anderson (1976). The results suggest that cloze procedure is an objective and reliable tool for ranking passage difficulty and discriminating between student reading ability in these two languages.

The use of cloze procedure as an index of the readability of French as a second language has been reported in two detailed and extensive reports (Kerr 1968, 1974). In the first of these reports cloze rankings of French passages were compared with those of experienced teachers. Kerr concludes:

> It appears from the results that cloze procedure could rank French passages in the same order, despite variations in deletion frequencies, despite different deletion systems, despite almost entirely independent sets of words deleted, despite different scoring systems and despite different presentation orders.
> (Kerr 1968, p. 70)

The second report by Kerr (1974) confirmed the findings of his earlier study while exploring the use of numerical taxonomy in the assessment of readability. Not only is this the first such use of numerical taxonomy, this investigation represents the most intensive examination yet of cloze procedure with French.

Finally, brief mention ought to be made of a little-known readability formula published in a book with the same title as the UKRA publication by Gilliland (1972). It's title - Läsbarhet - is Swedish for readability. Because the book is in Swedish may account for the fact that Lix (a shortened form of läsbarhetsindex or readability index) is hardly known. The book by Björnsson (1968) was published 14 years ago. It deserves to be brought to the attention of teachers and researchers in other countries.

Like many of the English readability formulae, Lix has two factors, a word and a sentence factor. The sentence factor is measured in the usual way by computing average sentence length in words. The word factor is again the familiar word length. However, because Lix measures word length without recourse to linguistic rules of syllabification, it appeared to us at Flinders University to be potentially useful across languages. Indeed, preliminary experiments, reported elsewhere (Anderson 1981), suggest that Lix may have useful application with French, German, Greek and English texts. Word length is defined as the percentage of words with more than six letters. The Lix formula, very simply, is:

Lix = word length + sentence length

This formula may have ready application in the multicultural classroom.

Facing the challenges

If the task of making a success of a multicultural society depends in part on the education system, then it is a joint responsibility of schools, teachers, students, teacher education institutions and professional associations. Of the very many issues involved relating to curriculum, to teacher education and development, to school and classroom organisation, the place of language teaching and learning is central and the reading or language teacher occupies a key role. The degree to which teachers are equipped by their background and training for the likely language problems of the multicultural classroom is seen as a major question.

Other important questions identified are how to diagnose students in need of special help, whether existing curriculum materials are appropriate for the needs of all learners, and how adequate are current methods for assessing such aspects as the readability of reading materials, especially for non-native speakers and for languages other than English. There are, of course, many other issues besides these but these are the ones that have been addressed principally above. They are seen to be important for Australian classrooms. It would be of interest to know if they were important also for classrooms in this country.

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